

The Norwegian Red Cross

It gives me great pleasure to welcome Sven Mollekleiv, the President of the Norwegian Red Cross, to give our annual 17th May Constitution address. We introduced this for the first time in 2013 and were delighted when Kåre Willoch, a former Norwegian Prime Minister, offered to give the inaugural lecture.

Sven has had a long association with the College. He was Secretary General of the Norwegian Red Cross from 1991 to 2001 and was part of the team responsible for the founding of a Nordic College in the fjords as part of the United World College movement. Sven was invited to take up the position as President of the Norwegian Red Cross in 2008 and currently holds many posts on committees, ranging from Amnesty International Norway to the ICRC's Special Fund for the Disabled. He is just back from a visit to Syria on behalf of the Red Cross.

I was particularly struck this time last year when our two student delegates at the UWC Congress in Cardiff chose to identify our connection with the Red Cross Rehabilitation Centre with which we share our campus and our landmine survivors' programme as the ingredients which make us distinct from other United World Colleges. The Red Cross is indeed an important part of our identity – and it is vital that we continue to consolidate both our partnership with the Rehabilitation Centre and with the Norwegian Red Cross – with shared values and philosophy at the heart of our work.

It strikes me as imperative that RCN students are introduced to the role and impact of the Red Cross – both in the present and the past. It was Henri Dunant, a 31 year old Swiss citizen, who surveyed the aftermath of the battle of Solferino - between French-Italian and Austrian forces – and the unimaginable agony of 30,000 wounded soldiers. It was his imagination and drive, combined with the commitment of other key founders, that helped to establish the Red Cross, reminding all of the importance of 'tutti fratelli' – and that we should provide assistance to the wounded without regard to their side in the conflict.

The Red Cross has long been an important part of the DNA of all Nordic countries and their contribution has been appreciated across the world for the past 150 years:

Within two weeks of the outbreak of the First World War, the Finnish Red Cross sprang into action by preparing two hospital units and offering to send them to wherever they were most needed. At the end of the war, the Danish Red Cross offered to act as a central clearing house for Russian prisoners in Germany and German prisoners in Russia.

In 1920, the League of Nations appointed the Norwegian polar explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, as special commissioner with the responsibility for the repatriation of all remaining prisoners of war.

In 1935, a telegram was sent from Addis Ababa to the International Committee in Geneva pleading for support and intervention as the Ethiopians sought to defend themselves against Italian colonial expansionist policy. The Norwegian, Danish and Swedish Red Cross societies sent field ambulances and it was a group of Norwegian doctors who sent a sample of phosgene back to Switzerland, confirming the rumours that gas – one of the most hated and feared of modern weapons – had been used against soldiers and civilians.

The Red Cross' supportive role during the Second World War has been well documented but its decision to maintain neutrality and not intervene when details of the Nazi's final solution began to emerge haunted the corridors of Geneva for many years. For some, it was the greatest defeat in the humanitarian mission as its leaders struggled to fathom the unimaginable of the holocaust.

But we should not lose sight of the Red Cross' immeasurable contribution throughout the war as innumerable violations of the Geneva Convention took place. The Norwegian Red Cross operated in exile in Britain – alongside King Haakon and the government. Indeed Count Folke Bernadotte, the Vice President of the Swedish Red Cross and nephew of the Swedish King embarked on a daring cloak-and-dagger rescue mission in 1945 to collect all Scandinavians in Germany's concentration camps.

I encourage all members of our College to read the history of the Red Cross – a penetrating and compelling insight into the history of the world over the past 150 years – and it is no surprise that the organisation has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on three occasions - in 1917, 1944 and 1963.

Prince Charles of Sweden, the President of the Swedish Red Cross, retired at the age of 82 – in his retiring speech in 1946, he perceptively identified that: 'the only true path to peace...is the creation of a more perfect breed of men [and women]: less egotistical, reflective, wise and fully conscious of their responsibility for what happens on earth...we get, in the end, the world we deserve'.

And this takes us back to the microcosm of our world here at Red Cross Nordic – and the vision of the founders of this College. This College was set up, in tandem with the Red Cross, so that we could help shape students from across the world who were 'less egotistical, reflective, wise and fully conscious of their responsibility for what happens on earth'.

The Red Cross is a crucial part of our identity here. All our first years undergo training and qualify for a Red Cross First Aid qualification in late January each year alongside a special programme for a group of second years. In order to gain the RCN Red Cross Diploma, students are now asked to make contact with their respective Red Cross organisations back at home and to volunteer their services.

It was another former Secretary General of the Norwegian Red Cross, Børge Brende - and now Minister of Foreign Affairs in the current Norwegian government – who helped us to establish our Land Mine Survivors' Programme here at RCN.

As part of the Humanitarian Global Concerns Day planned for October, we have invited Mads Harlem from the Oslo Red Cross office to talk to our students about the Geneva Convention and international humanitarian law. This will be the biennial Mandela Lecture – given to celebrate the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela, the UWC movement's Honorary President and the former Protector of the South African Red Cross.

In an address, the 85 year old Mandela captured the humanitarian essence of the Red Cross and what it stands for:

'Not only does the Red Cross hold a special place in our collective sense of ourselves as a globally caring community; to me personally, and those who shared the experience of being political prisoners, the Red Cross was a beacon of humanity within the dark inhumane world of political imprisonment.'

The Haugland Rehabilitation Centre and RCN continue to operate in tandem here on campus, under the Red Cross banner. 2015 will see the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Norwegian Red Cross and also the 20th anniversary of the founding of Red Cross Nordic – and we hope that we can celebrate together.

And we shall continue to work hard to strengthen our partnership at regional and national level with the Norwegian Red Cross with exciting new projects ahead. Sven, it is my sincere hope that ‘What’s past is prologue, what[’s] to come [is] yours and [our] discharge’ [Shakespeare – The Tempest]. We are hugely proud of our partnership with the Norwegian Red Cross and it is a pleasure and privilege to invite you to address our College today.

Richard D A Lamont
Rektor
UWC Red Cross Nordic